

# Histories Mysteries: Be the Biographer



Thomas Jefferson, like most of our founding fathers, and politicians today was a difficult, complicated man. Like so many others, Jefferson was often conflicted between his beliefs in theory versus practicality. As we study about the difficulty Jefferson had with making the Louisiana Purchase, let us also realize that there were quite a few other topics he was conflicted on.

Today, we look at Jefferson's view on slaves/African Americans.

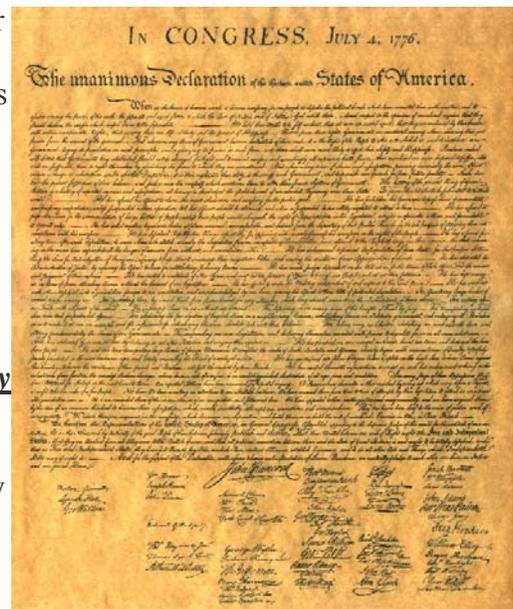
In small groups, you will read and dissect each of the five passages to break down what you believe each one displays about Jefferson's views. You will then answer the questions about each, and prepare a 1-2 paragraph summary of the document, including what the document was, and what it's meaning reveals about Jefferson.

The culminating activity will be to form an overall impression of Jefferson as individuals, and to express YOUR opinion of what kind of man Jefferson was, and to compare him to a person of today's society who has also exhibited “conflicting” actions/statements/opinions.

Doc 1:

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

**We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.**--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, --That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.



Doc 2:

## To Benjamin Banneker Philadelphia, Aug. 30, 1791

SIR,

-- I thank you sincerely for your letter of the 19th instant and for the Almanac it contained. No body wishes more than I do to see such proofs as you exhibit, that nature has given to our black brethren, talents equal to those of the other colors of men, and that the appearance of a want of them is owing merely to the degraded condition of their existence, both in Africa & America. I can add with truth, that no body wishes more ardently to see a good system commenced for raising the condition both of their body & mind to what it ought to be, as fast as the imbecility of their present existence, and other circumstances which cannot be neglected, will admit. I have taken the liberty of sending your Almanac to Monsieur de Condorcet, Secretary of the Academy of Sciences at Paris, and member of the Philanthropic society, because I considered it as a document to which your whole colour had a right for their justification against the doubts which have been entertained of them. I am with great esteem, Sir



Your most obed't humble serv't. □

Doc 3:

## To Henri Gregoire Washington, February 25, 1809

SIR,



-- I have received the favor of your letter of August 17th, and with it the volume you were so kind as to send me on the "Literature of Negroes." Be assured that no person living wishes more sincerely than I do, to see a complete refutation of the doubts I have myself entertained and expressed on the grade of understanding allotted to them by nature, and to find that in this respect they are on a par with ourselves. My doubts were the result of personal observation on the limited sphere of my own State, where the opportunities for the development of their genius were not favorable, and those of exercising it still less so. I expressed them therefore with great hesitation; but whatever be their degree of talent it is no measure of their rights. Because Sir Isaac Newton was superior to others in understanding, he was not therefore lord of the person or property of others. On this subject they are gaining daily in the opinions of nations, and hopeful advances are making towards their re-establishment on an equal footing with the other colors of the human family. I pray you therefore to accept my thanks for the many instances you have enabled me to observe of respectable intelligence in that race of men, which cannot fail to have effect in hastening the day of their relief; and to be assured of the sentiments of high and just esteem and consideration which I tender to yourself with all sincerity.

Doc 4:

James Heaton, Monticello, May 20, 1826

DEAR SIR, --

The subject of your letter of April 20, is one on which I do not permit myself to express an opinion, but when time, place, and occasion may give it some favorable effect. A good cause is often injured more by ill-timed efforts of its friends than by the arguments of its enemies. Persuasion, perseverance, and patience are the best advocates on questions depending on the will of others. The revolution in public opinion which this cause requires, is not to be expected in a day, or perhaps in an age; but time, which outlives all things, will outlive this evil also. My sentiments have been forty years before the public. Had I repeated them forty times, they would only have become the more stale and threadbare. Although I shall not live to see them consummated, they will not die with me; but living or dying, they will ever be in my most fervent prayer. This is written for yourself and not for the public, in compliance with your request of two lines of sentiment on the subject.

Accept the assurance of my good will and respect. □

Doc 5:

Notes on the State of Virginia, Query 14, 1784 (Peterson 265)

Besides those of colour, figure, and hair, there are other physical distinctions proving a difference of race. They have less hair on the face and body. They secrete less by the kidneys, and more by the glands of the skin, which gives them a very strong and disagreeable odour. This greater degree of transpiration renders them more tolerant of heat, and less so of cold, than the whites...They seem to require less sleep. A black, after hard labour through the day, will be induced by the slightest amusements to sit up till midnight, or later, though knowing he must be out with the first dawn of the morning. They are at least as brave, and more adventuresome. But this may perhaps proceed from a want of forethought, which prevents their seeing a danger till it be present. When present, they do not go through it with more coolness or steadiness than the whites. They are more ardent after their female: but love seems with them to be more an eager desire, than a tender delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation. Their griefs are transient. Those numberless afflictions, which render it doubtful whether heaven has given life to us in mercy or in wrath, are less felt, and sooner forgotten with them. In general, their existence appears to participate more of sensation than reflection...An animal whose body is at rest, and who does not reflect, must be disposed to sleep of course. Comparing them by their faculties of memory, reason, and imagination, it appears to me, that in memory they are equal to the whites; in reason much inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid; and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous.

Questions for each document:

- 1) What positive things does Jefferson state about Africans?
- 2) What negative things does Jefferson state about Africans?
- 3) What evidence, if any, does Jefferson provide for his conclusions?
- 4) Summarize, in general, the idea of the Document

Questions for specific documents:

Doc 1: Dec of Independence

- 1) What does the phrase “We hold these truths to be self-evident” mean?
- 2) What does the phrase “the equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them” mean?
- 3) How Does Jefferson as a slaveowner himself make you look at this statement? Why?

Doc 2: Benjamin Banneker

- 1) Has Banneker convinced Jefferson that Blacks and Whites are equal?
- 2) Why do people have a negative view of Blacks, according to Jefferson?
- 3) What is Jefferson's goal for African Americans?

Doc 3: Henri Gregoire

- 1) What does Jefferson believe about Blacks?
- 2) Where do Jefferson's biased views come from?
- 3) What does he state are his goals from this letter?

Doc 4: James Heaton

- 1) Why is Jefferson not speaking up on the cause?
- 2) What is necessary for the public opinion to change?
- 3) What current topic does this seem that we can relate to?
- 4) What would be the consequence of repeating his opinion multiple times?

Doc 5: Notes on the State of Virginia

- 1) Describe some (at least 3) of the physical differences Jefferson describes between Blacks and Whites
- 2) Describe some (at least 3) of the behavioral differences Jefferson describes between Blacks and Whites
- 3) Describe some (at least 2) of the mental differences Jefferson describes between Blacks and Whites

FINAL QUESTION:

Upon reading all of these articles, does your opinion of Thomas Jefferson change at all? Why or why not?